2.3 Mindfulness and memory

2.3.1 Note that from the start, we have not mentioned “memory of things long past” as a definition of sati. This is simply because it does not fit well with what is said in the suttas about how sati is to be practised [2.2.2]. Memory is only part of the description of the process of sati, “mindfulness”; that is, memory is an extension—a support of mindfulness, or a result of it—of what happens when we are mindful.

Mindfulness practice usually relates to events in the present or in the very recent past. In the context of meditation, sati develops when we cultivate attentive observation of our breath, for example. It is in this context of reflection that sati develops as memory when we intentionally recall the Dhamma as we have been taught or that we have learned.1

Another possibly relevant factor is the etymological connection between the Pali word sati and the cognate Sanskrit smṛti. “Memory” was definitely the primary meaning for the Sanskrit smṛti. This connection, which was well-known to monastic students and scholars of mindfulness: they had to remember these instructions and put them into practice as part of their mindfulness training. Hence, mindfulness is understood as entailing the remembering of wholesome states that we should focus on, develop and guard.

Furthermore, even more importantly, this memory is reinforced as a result of mindfulness itself; but the definitive feature of sati remains that of attentive observation. We will see this definitive role of sati highlighted in the parable of the city in the Nagaropama Sutta (A 7.63) in the next section.

2.3.2 The Nagaropama Sutta (A 7.63) defines the noble disciple (ariya, sāvaka)—one on the path of awakening (streamwinner, etc, including the arhat) as having 7 good qualities (satta saddhamma): wise faith, moral shame, moral fear, deep learning in Dharma, exertiveness (in moral virtue and concentration), mindful and wise (understands the true nature of reality).2 The quality “mindful” (satimā) is defined as follows:

“He is mindful, possessing excellent mindfulness and penetration;3 and he remembers and recalls what was done long ago, what was said long ago.”4

(A 7.63, 25.2), SD 52.13

Clearly here, we can see how mindfulness, as taught by the Buddha, works with other spiritual qualities for the sake of gaining the path of awakening.

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2 These 7 good qualities are, in Pali, respectively: (adj) saddha, hirimā, ottappa, bhau-s, suta, āraddha, viriya, satimā and paññavā (A 7.63, 19-27), SD 5.13 (2.3).
3 “Mindfulness and penetration,” sati, nepakka; on nepakka, see Vbh 249; VbhA 311 f.
4 Satimā hoti paramena sati, nepakkena samannāgato ciro, katarī pi ciro, bhūsitam pi saritā anussaritā.
2.3.3 He “remembers and recollects” what was said or done long ago—for effective Dharma learning and practice, we should have a good memory. The Commentary distinguishes between sarita, “remembering” (that is, remembering once) and anussarita, “recollecting” (remembering again and again). To “remember” means to be familiar with past events or experiences, recalling them almost at once. To “recollect,” on the other hand, needs some effort to recall something, and to sustain that memory in some purposeful way.

Mindfulness (sati), then, should be understood as functioning as memory, with which it perceives the present object of awareness. Mindfulness keeps up this perception: this is attention to the present moment, which is itself the basis for a continuing good memory. The Commentary takes the mention of sati here to imply all the 7 factors of awakening,5 of which mindfulness is the first (MA 3:30) [4.2.4]. Hence, we should add that even by itself, especially in reference to being mindful, such as while meditating, being mindful also means that we are aware (sampajāna) or “clearly knowing” what is going on before us.

R819 Inspiration 477
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5 See satta bojjhanga, SD 10.15.